

From individual perturbation of intercultural valence, to collective sense: the development of the intercultural competences

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This study explores the link between individual intercultural experience and collective sense. It is a component of a wider research aimed at investigating the process of change of a sample of international cooperation professionals of Italian origin, and the intercultural competence they acquired along their personal experience and professional life. That research involved 46 professionals: 16 from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in developing countries, 10 Italian UN officers (from World Health Organization - WHO and UNDP, in Geneva), and 20 Representatives of NGOs based in the Italian Lombardy Region. The research contributes with new knowledge on the importance of intercultural competences in education and about the personal dimension which expresses its own "cultural fragments". The study proposes a dynamic model of intercultural competences, characterized by three forces and 14 recurrent elements, emerging from the empirical research.

Introduction

In recent decades, the cultural dimension has become an increasingly important issue in view of the intensification of contacts and coexistence with people from different cultures. These social transformations of planetary importance have led scholars to understand which mechanisms could be triggered in individuals and how people react to this type of constant stimuli. While, on the one hand, cohabitation has led to an ever-increasing questioning of diversity, on the other hand it has been understood that the construction of a positive way of living together is not automatic, innate and easy to implement.

International cooperation provides an interesting scenario to observe processes that are different from what is usually perceived. For example, the conditions, including resources and social status, are substantially different between migrants that left their countries of origin "pushed" by conflicts or dramatic economic situations and international professionals who migrate to a developing country "pulled" by their humanitarian motivation and personal project. This exercise of entering and exiting from the customary frames of sense, may lead the individual to elaborate instruments for a more flexible mental structure. It is also true that individuals who find themselves in an environment "completely" different from the one they are used, as it happens for international workers, will have a greater chance to face different aspects of that new reality, and to question and eventually confirm (or reject) consolidated views and opinions. Thus, it is of great interest to be able to understand how an experience, or parts of it, can contribute to a personal richness and to a collective heritage, rather than uprooting the person who, having lived through multiple experiences abroad, finds him or herself in a middle zone without a real sense of belonging or feeling at home. Pierre Bourdieu, in the preface to Abdelmalek Sayad's book: "The Double Absence", takes up the migrant's idea of Sayad as an "out-of-place person", without a (or deprived of) a place in the social space, whose dimension is always very difficult to define. The double absence indicates the social not-being both at the place of origin and at the place of arrival¹.

¹ A. Sayad, *La doppia assenza. Dalle illusioni dell'emigrato alle sofferenze dell'immigrato*, Cortina Editore, Milano 1999, pp. 3-7

The transformation of the experience into something positive becomes possible on the one hand by exploring those moments of rupture that the subject lives in relationships with people from another culture, and on the other hand by activating a reflective thought on the episodes in which these perturbations occur. In this way it can be thought that the link between the individual and the group lies not only in the understanding of intercultural competences recurring in different moments of the individual's life and that may be found in others, but also of the incompetence, i.e. something that went wrong and that can be reconsidered later on by the same person or, in training courses, by others. This article explores these processes in order to understand how the topic may lend itself to countless analyses and applications in education.

Theoretical framework

Several authors have explored intercultural competences in very diverse fields such as managers staying for work in a foreign country; young people studying abroad through the Erasmus programme; couples adopting minors through international adoption. In this sense, it should be considered that if on the one hand there are common aspects in dealing with intercultural competences, which could be defined as transversal competences, on the other hand there are specific aspects, which in this case concern international cooperation workers and who have lived or live abroad.

Different studies use different terms in defining and assigning meaning to competences, including cultural and intercultural competences, and identifying the main elements of the various models they propose. It should be pointed out that even if one identifies a difference between the terms used, sometimes this distinction can be blurred, since they are used as complementary or synonyms. This aspect has been highlighted for the terms "intercultural" and "multicultural", but can also apply to the terms "cultural" and "intercultural". Regarding cultural aspects, Martine Abdallah-Preteille clarifies that they should be considered in their dynamic and non-static form, in the form of cultural fragments that individuals express, and in connection with the relationships between the individual and the groups, rather than in relation with the sum of characteristics and cultural traits. Through his or her own cultural fragments, the individual expresses the belonging and codes of reference that he or she freely chooses and expresses in an ever-increasing heterogeneous context. In this sense, moving from the concept of culture to the notion of culturality, and from interculturality to interculturality, would allow to conceptualize cultural phenomena starting from dynamics, transformations, weaving and reworking.

From the conceptualization of culture and interculture, intercultural competences imply a need for a wider frame of reference that does not focus exclusively on the very dimension of competences, taking instead into account processes and continuous learning in consideration of their dynamism and development.

Jack Mazirow's work about the process of transformation permits to maintain a broad vision about intercultural competences by including them in adult education and, in particular, regarding how individuals learn a different way of thinking in a given socio-cultural context. He founded the bases of the constructivist theory of learning on the reflective and critical approach to self and to world knowledge and on transformative learning, which generates patterns of new meaning or revised meaningful perspectives that can guide action and give sense to life experiences².

Taking into account the dynamism of culture, the development of intercultural competences in an ongoing process and permanent, lifelong adult education, below the most relevant models of cultural and intercultural competences will be further explored.

² M. Franzini, *Competenze interculturali nella cooperazione internazionale. Esperienze di cooperanti italiani all'estero*, La Rondine, Catanzaro 2017, pp. 34-35.

The most significant models in the field of cultural and intercultural competences include Michael Byram, Milton Bennett and Mitchell Hammer, Edward Taylor and Darla K. Deardorff. Bennett and Hammer defined the intercultural competence as: *“The ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts”*³. The focus with respect to the concept is referred to the communicative sphere, while authors like Byram link it more to the behavioral level. In fact, Michael Byram understands intercultural competence as: *“The ability to behave appropriately in intercultural situations, the affective and cognitive ability to establish and maintain intercultural relationships and the ability to stabilize the ones’s self identity while mediating between cultures”*⁴. Byram's definition includes the behavioural aspect combined with the cognitive and affective dimension, in a perspective of internal personal stability. Byram's model resumes the classical concept of know, know how to be, know how to do, know how to understand and get involved with the different knowledge, and related skills and attitudes.

Similarly, the definition of Darla K. Deardorff draws attention to the relational and situational dimension, as well as to the personal dimensions that involve the development of these competences. According to Deardorff, the intercultural competence is: *“The ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes (motivation), intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection”*⁵. Like authors such as Bennett, Hammer and Byram, attention is focused on the effectiveness and appropriateness of their own behavioural or communicative modalities in intercultural or cross-cultural situations, where cross-cultural means the co-existence of people from different cultures.

Milton Bennett and Mitchell Hammer’s model refers to the development of intercultural sensitivity and is the result of a constructivist conception of reality. It consists of six guidelines, three ethnocentric and three ethno-relative. The most controversial aspect of the model is the concept of stages in the development of intercultural competences, which would not take into account a development made of improvements, but also retrocessions.

Edward Taylor focuses on intercultural competence in terms of *“adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture”*⁶. This vision of intercultural competences is specifically aimed at people who have to live in a context different from that of their origin. Thus one could think of people in need to stay in a "host country". Actually, the concept of intercultural competences could be extended to all subjects wherever they live, since interculture makes sense even in the absence of foreigners, due to the fact that interculture “dwells” in the person's feelings. It's also true that the encounter with others makes it possible to activate unknown or unexplored parts of the self.

The empirical research, which has involved professionals working in the field of international cooperation, has identified significant intercultural moments in their experience. These moments can be considered as perturbations, which function as a “sentinel” to locate the transformations, where the subject becomes aware of something that does not belong to his own frame of reference. These moments show that there is a process of significant change in the individual and that this change can be activated by cultural diversity. These moments of life are interesting because they

³ J. M. Bennett, M. J. Bennett, *Developing intercultural sensitivity. An integrative approach to global and domestic diversity*, in “Handbook of intercultural training, 2003, pp. 149-165.

⁴ G. Alred, M. Byram, *Becoming an intercultural mediator: a longitudinal study of residence abroad*, in “Journal of multilingual and multicultural development”, vol. 23, n. 5, 2002, pp. 339-352.

⁵ D. D.K. Deardorff, *Intercultural competence – The key competence in the 21st century?*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, p. 5.

⁶ E. W. Taylor, *Intercultural competency: a transformative learning process*, in «Adult Education Quarterly», vol. 44, n. 3.

show how the person reacts in certain situations, such as active competences and that there is a link between competences and incompetences, and experiences among individuals, to the point that the question of competences recurrent in the histories of international professionals starts to be addressed. The methodology used in this research is further elaborated below, with particular attention to the tools used and the practical steps followed in order to build the model and the basic concept.

Research Methods

The research methods used included the semi-structured interview, administered to the Heads of NGOs of the Italian Lombardy Region, the questionnaire and the narrative interview. The same questionnaire has been administered to Italian professionals working with both NGOs and to UN system organizations.

In order to build an homogenous sample, thus limiting the variables and reduce the possibility of responses derived from excessively diverse cultural backgrounds, only professionals of Italian origin were involved.

The interviews to the Heads of NGOs provided a general framework of the situation of Italian professionals, working with NGOs in developing countries. The questionnaires and the narrative interviews have allowed to further analyze deep change and intercultural competence. The international workers' experience helps to identify recurrent intercultural competences that allow to relate with people of different cultures and to deal with new scenarios.

A part of the research focuses on the experience described by ten international United Nations officers (six people working at the World Health Organization, WHO, and four at the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP). Each person was met two or three times. The 10 international officers are Italian, 8 males and 2 females, aged between 32 and 61 years. Their experience in international cooperation varied between 4 and 37 years; in 8 out of 10 the experience started before the age of 30, and 4 out of the 10 of them had a previous working experience with an NGO in developing countries.

After filling-in the questionnaire, a life chronogram of the interviewee was created and information was recorded through the narrative interview, asking to the interviewee to tell about two episodes of their life in which they believed having used intercultural competence.

The autobiographical method used for this research, was theorized by Robert Atkinson. He points out that narratives not only have a meaning in themselves, but can contribute to a wider meaning found in different histories of other people, therefore particular and universal at the same time. It could also be that the person's history allows "going beyond the narrative fact to develop new ideas about histories or lives"⁷.

The ten international officers interviewed told about a great variety of situations, such as the encounter with a Marabou (the sorcerers in Africa) and his context, the situation of the relationship between man and woman in Morocco, and an incident with a maid in Vietnam.

The life episodes they reported, allowed to understand how intercultural competences are activated, what were the steps of understanding and what competences were recurrent in narrative interviews and episodes with intercultural value. It has also been interesting to note the link between competences and incompetences, because from the latter the individual may be able to understand something that transforms into learning.

⁷ R. Atkinson, *L'intervista narrativa. Raccontare la storia di sé nella ricerca formativa, organizzativa e sociale*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2002, p. 112.

An example is the experience of the international worker in Tanzania with a Marabou. In the circumstance, the professional tells how curiosity and discovery of a given context and of different people are activated, such as the contradictions between one's own way of thinking, believing and representing reality, living, giving meaning to things with respect to the people of the place. In telling the history, the interviewee expresses the sense of giving value both to his own thinking and to that of the other, even if one could consider them to be in conflict with each other. The ability expressed by the worker is also that of decentralization, managing to make place in his mind for a different view, whose value he fully recognizes. The person had the ability to "break" his or her mental patterns and upset them and this was made possible by the pain experienced in the event of life that allowed him or her to break his or her beliefs/certainties.

Based on their stories the competences used by the interviewees in the narrated event were considered, i.e. the competences that had been expressed, collected and interpreted in the course of the episode itself. The previous case shows how the person manages to make mental space for another way of thinking and conceiving reality. This aspect is found in the author's dynamic model of intercultural competences, defined as the ability to "break down the certainties (breaking of schemes) and manage the uncertainties (disagreement and paradox)"⁸. This method has been used to interpret the collected histories allowing the identification of "recurring intercultural competences", i.e. those that often recur in life episodes with intercultural valence.

Research Findings

In consideration of the theoretical and the practical part of the research, a dynamic model of the intercultural competences was created. The dynamic model consists of the recurring elements in the histories of international professionals in the sample and that frequently intervene in moments of intercultural valence. The link between individual and group is affirmed in the repetitiveness of the way people react to events, which require intercultural competences.

The author's model is made up of 14 elements and three forces⁹: the force of change, of interaction and of self-preservation. The 14 elements are: Embrace a global point of view; Openness to diversity and recognition of the value of the other person and of her/his way of thinking; Listening skills; Comprehend the cultural sense (linguistic knowledge and communicative skills); Break down the certainties (breaking of schemes) and manage the uncertainties (disagreement and paradox); Capacity to decentralize; Create sharing spaces and bridge significances; Re-discuss the refusal barriers (stereotypes, prejudices, racism, discrimination); Suspend judgment; Capacity to explore (curiosity and discovery); Flexibility; Empathy; Humility and respect; Trust.

These elements can be considered as recurrent competences, in other words competences that frequently intervene in various contexts where the person experiences a cultural diversity. It must be considered that the competences can develop in situations of success, as well as when problems or incomprehension arise that are resolved in some way. The intercultural competences should not to be understood as isolated elements, but in their dynamic form. The intercultural competences develop in time and can be built. The international professionals demonstrated the ability to become a "glue" between multiple worlds, and between the infinitely large and the small. They become capable of "living the world on herself/himself", that is, to live on herself/himself the diversity in relationships with others.

⁸ M. Franzini, *Competenze interculturali nella cooperazione internazionale. Esperienze di cooperanti italiani all'estero*, La Rondine, Catanzaro 2017, pp. 359-360.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp.356-369

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The dynamic model of intercultural competences can be applied to any training context. The constituent elements are not specific to a topic, but cover the aspects that intervene in relations between people of different cultures. Currently, the model does not include measurement tools and does not consider evolutionary stages, because unlike the model of Bennett and Hammer, it does not foresee stages, but a process of development with elements that dynamize each other, as well as internal forces of the individual that allow him or her to account for a balance and a personal stability that allows the development of such competences. It would certainly be useful to have tools to evaluate the development of individual intercultural competences, since it would allow to strengthen through training those aspects of personal fragility and difficulties that should be explored, especially for professionals working in the social sphere and in serving people.

It is important to keep in mind that there is not a final level to be reached or a final stage in the learning process to be prefigured for trainees, instead the goal is to build the ability to return to real life situations reusing known personal resources in new circumstances, whether with a positive or negative solution of the same event. The issue is about building relationships that are advantageous for oneself and for others, being able to benefit from the aspects of diversity such as richness and beauty in the co-construction of positive living contexts.

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